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ABSTRACT

The Urban Education Project developed by Research for Better Schools, Inc., has focused on meeting the needs of urban students in a changing and demanding society. In the second contract year of a 5-year contract, the project developed the Urban Education Restructuring Framework by categorizing relevant literature and school-oriented experiences into four themes to guide restructuring decision making. These themes, cultural diversity and learning, unrecognized abilities and underdeveloped potential of urban students, enhancement of ability development through motivation and effort, and resilience, constitute a new vision of the urban learner. The new vision is then integrated with the following areas that are central to the functioning of schools: (1) curriculum, instruction, and assessment; (2) staff development; (3) school environment; and (4) effective management. Urban students should not be seen as the problem, they should be viewed as a major ingredient of the solution to the problems of educational achievement, a strong economy, and a productive society. One figure illustrates the discussion. (Contains 27 references.) (SLD)

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Organizing a Knowledge Base for Urban School Restructuring

Fall 1992

Restructuring to Educate the Urban Learner

A Decisionmaking Framework

RESEARCH FOR BETTER SCHOOLS, INC.
Philadelphia, PA

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INTRODUCTION

As part of its workscope in the five-year proposal for the Mid-Atlantic Regional Educational Laboratory, the Urban Education Project of Research for Better Schools (RBS) agreed to initiate and support efforts to improve restructuring in urban school districts. The project planned to focus on meeting the needs of urban students in a changing and educationally demanding society. The proposal acknowledged the importance of reflecting a knowledge base that incorporates and disseminates the most current, promising, and pertinent research in restructuring activities.

The Urban Education Framework presents *a new vision of the urban learner* as culturally diverse, capable, motivated, and resilient (Bernal, 1980; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992; Tharp, 1989; and Winfield, 1991). This view represents a major paradigm shift in research and theories of intelligence, learning, and instruction that could lead to a new order of results for urban learners. The new view challenges former sweeping generalizations that characterized urban learners as deprived, underachieving, unmotivated, and at-risk. Rather it suggests that urban educators *build on the strengths of the urban learner* by embracing change that utilizes the research on cultural diversity and learning, unrecognized ability and underdeveloped potential, enhancing ability development through motivation and effort, and resilience. The urban education framework is grounded in the belief that *focused educational change that gives special attention to urban learner issues* can heighten opportunities for students to achieve academic success and life-long productivity.

During the first year of the five-year contract, the Urban Education project emphasized the development of a knowledge ad experience base on school restructuring models and methods. The major objective was to translate the knowledge and experience gained by assisting schools with their restructuring efforts into a set of research-based materials for use by other schools just initiating a system-wide restructuring project.

The Urban Education Restructuring Framework represents the further development of the original knowledge base during the second contract year by categorizing relevant literature and school-oriented experiences into four themes to guide restructuring decisionmaking. These themes, cultural diversity and learning, unrecognized abilities and underdeveloped potential, enhancing ability development through motivation and effort, and resilience constitute a new vision of the urban learner and a new point of departing for initiating change in urban schools.

AN OVERVIEW—RESTRUCTURING TO EDUCATE THE URBAN LEARNER: A DECISIONMAKING FRAMEWORK

The Urban Education staff of Research for Better Schools believes that educators can help urban students become capable, motivated, resilient students who are able to build on their cultural strengths to achieve educational success. They are creating a new vision of the urban learner which is tied to a decisionmaking framework that will enable urban educators to restructure education by implementing the new vision.

This overview presents the (1) rationale for restructuring urban education, (2) research-based themes which are the foundation for the new vision of the urban learner, and (3) a decisionmaking framework that enables educators to implement the new vision of the urban learner.

The Rationale for Restructuring Urban Education

The need for restructuring urban education emerges directly from the comments and analyses of educators and policymakers who (1) state the critical need in our society for urban poor and minority populations to fully contribute to our economy and democratic society, and, also, (2) describe the failure of current practices to educate urban learners, especially minorities, so that they can be productive citizens.

For example, the authors of *Building the Nation's Work Force From the Inside Out: Educating Minorities for the Twenty-first Century* make both of these points.

> In most of the statements supporting the integration of minorities into the workforce, there has been the acknowledgment, implicit or explicit, that the educational system has failed to provide adequate preparation for these groups to compete on an equal footing with whites in the labor force. Any policies to prepare U.S. minorities for labor-force participation in the areas where job strategies are most critical must involve the improvement (and perhaps restructuring) of the educational system for minorities at all levels of the educational pipeline (Rumberger & Levin, 1989).

Similarly, in the view of the former Maryland State Superintendent of Schools, an advisor to the Business Roundtable and the National Center on Education and the Economy, educators have not succeeded with poor minority students.

> We have a miserable performance record in educating low-income, racial- and language-minority students. Given the changing demographics of our nation, we cannot succeed

> economically or in sustaining our democracy unless we succeed educationally with those students with whom we have historically failed. We need to create the policies and structures that result in high achievement by those students as well (Hornbeck, 1992).

Clearly, concerned educators cannot accept the status quo and continue to do what they always have done in the past; it simply does not work. They must take responsibility for educating urban, poor, minority learners; recognize current educational failure; and do things differently. Educational practice must change. The new vision of the urban learner will guide educators in making required changes.

Another argument for specific attention to restructuring urban education lies in the inadequacy of current educational reform proposals to address the unique issues and conditions in urban schools and, thus, substantially impact the achievement problems of large numbers of poor minority students. In the midst of the many political, economic, social, and technological forces pressing to restructure schools for all students that followed the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the International Assessment of Mathematics and Science (IAMS) reports, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that generic restructuring frameworks and designs for educational change do not include specific attention to the unique issues and conditions in urban schools and, therefore, may not substantially impact on the academic achievement problems of large numbers of poor minority students (Lytle, 1992; Passow, 1991). The research foundation underlying the four themes of the new vision of the urban learner (described below) provide attention to the unique issues and contexts of urban learning.

The Urban Education staff recognizes that even if restructuring focuses directly on the complexities of educating urban learners, that is not enough to produce change. Restructuring is a tremendously complex, long-term set of events. It must also integrate the standard theories of human development, instructional pedagogy, and change with those that are specific to urban learners across all areas of educational decisionmaking and practice. Limiting attention to either the process of change (e.g., decentralization, shared decisionmaking, collaboration) or the content to be changed (e.g., higher order thinking skills instruction, technology, curriculum integration) will not sufficiently impact on student outcomes. Educational change, in the end, must be fully systemic and requires the collective, focused, and creative energy of educators, researchers, legislators, and leadership (Conley, 1991; McDonnell, 1989; Smith & O'Day, 1990).

A New Vision of the Urban Learner: Four Research-Based Themes

Four themes, namely (1) cultural diversity and learning, (2) unrecognized ability/underdeveloped potential, (3) enhancing ability development through motivation and effort, and (4) resilience, provide the

foundation for the new vision of the urban learner. This new vision sees the urban student as a capable, motivated, resilient learner, able to build on cultural strengths to achieve educational success; it challenges former characterizations of urban students as deprived, underachieving, unmotivated, and at-risk. In addition, the new vision requires building on the strengths of the urban learner by legitimizing and utilizing the research knowledge summarized in the theme areas.

The research establishing the foundation for the four themes demonstrates causal and/or correlational relationships between dynamic variables, and patterns characteristic of many urban students. Each theme is briefly developed in the attached summaries, which highlight important paradigm shifts in research and theories of intelligence, learning, and instruction leading to a new order of results for urban students. The research documents the major shifts in educators' knowledge and understanding that are required to realize the new vision of the urban learner. These changes include:

- Intelligence is modifiable not fixed (Feuerstein, 1980; Sternberg, 1985; Wasserman, 1987).
- Intelligence is multifaceted not unitary (Gardner, 1983; Sternberg, 1985).
- Culture is a more powerful instrument for recognizing and defining intelligent behavioral differences between groups than either genetics or socioeconomics (Bernal, 1980; Lesser, Fifer & Clark, 1965; Stodolsky & Lesser, 1967; Stevenson, 1992; Tharp, 1989).

The theme summaries integrate research information to develop implications for educational decisionmaking and to provide guidance to urban restructuring efforts. A brief overview of the content of each of the themes follows.

Cultural diversity and learning	By understanding research findings on cultural differences and how social organization, sociolinguistics, cognition, and motivation are displayed by a specific culture, educators can align school curriculum, instruction, expectations, routines, and staff development to support the learning of the urban student (Tharp, 1989).
Unrecognized ability/ underdeveloped potential	The role of culture in cognitive development has clear implications for the need to identify and/or design instruments which recognize abilities which transcend the context of majority and individual cultures. Such abilities must be developed by the curriculum and instructional strategies used to meet the social and economic requirements of the 21st

century, e.g., communication, problem solving, leadership, organization, creativity (Bernal, 1980).

Enhancing ability development through motivation and effort	Classrooms currently reflect a culture (in the organization of existing curriculum, instruction, and assessment) that emphasizes ability as the behavioral characteristic to be rewarded (i.e., motivation to try hard and learning from errors are not rewarded or recognized as a practical part of the learning process). In this model, errors are interpreted as an indication of failure and potential to learn is not seen. The emphasis needs to be changed to a new model of learning, one in which the classroom culture views effort as important as innate ability. Teachers must create an environment in which students learn from errors and effort is rewarded (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992).
Resilience	The research on the health and psychological factors of resilience provides an alternative to current conceptualizations of educational risk. A student's decision to remain in school despite the fact that he or she sees few job opportunities, receives no support or incentives, and experiences negative peer pressure is an example of an individual's resilience. In order to move beyond simply identifying and categorizing youth as at-risk, educators must shift to understanding resilience and use educational strategies which increase resilience in students (Winfield, 1991; Rutter, 1987).

An understanding of the research foundation of these four themes and their implications for strategies which translate such knowledge into educational practice provide the core of understanding that will enable educators to restructure classrooms and schools for urban learners.

Implementing the New Vision of the Urban Learner: A Decisionmaking Framework

The following decisionmaking framework integrates the new vision of the urban learner (as expressed in the four themes) with four areas central to the functioning of schools, namely (1) curriculum, instruction, and assessment, (2) staff development, (3) school environment, and (4) management. Urban educators at all levels continuously make decisions in each of these areas. These decisions need to be informed by the research-based knowledge related to the urban learner. Information found in the four themes of the new vision can help urban educators conduct needs assessments and prioritize strategies in each of these functional areas. A

summary of the contribution of the new vision of the urban learner (and the composite themes) to school decisionmaking in each of the functional areas is offered below.

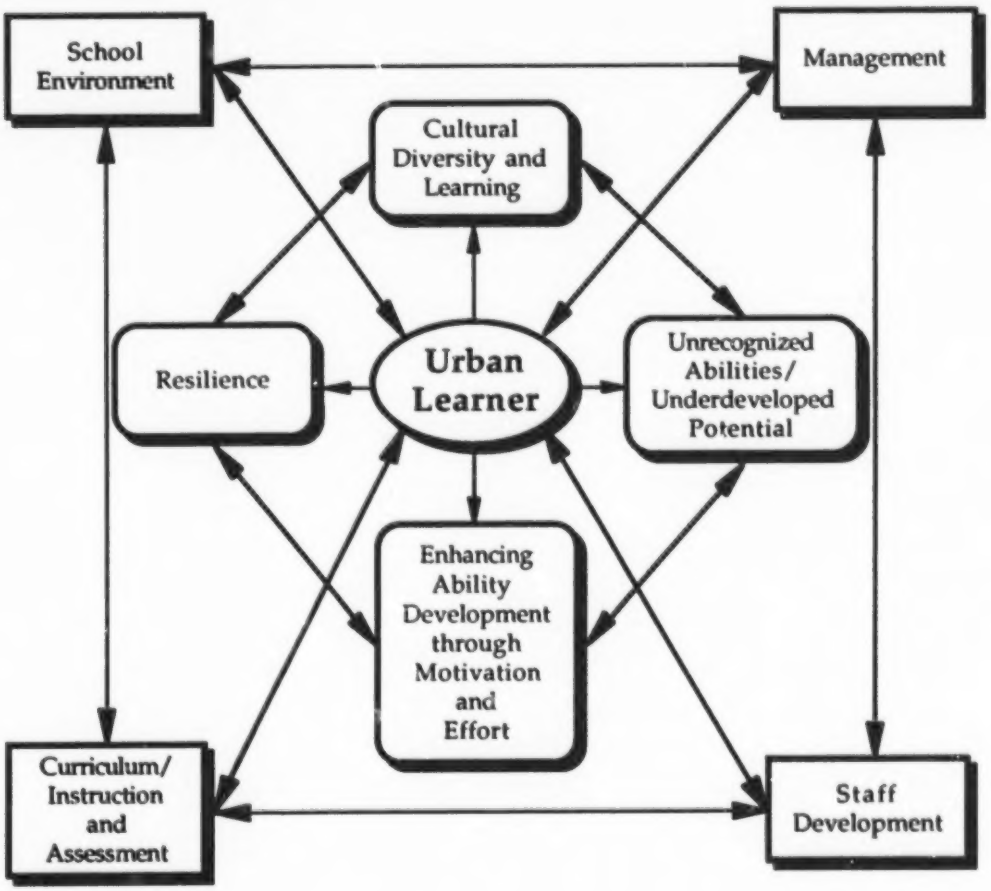
Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment	Curriculum and instruction must be tied to the cultural experiences/values of students; and assessment must facilitate the development of abilities and knowledge relevant to the lives of students and the needs of society (Cohen, 1992).
Staff Development	Educators must develop an expanded awareness and ability to value, understand, and engage culturally different students in order to develop their abilities, e.g., to establish new perceptions; enhance ability development through motivation and effort; recognize and develop culturally different ability patterns; and to use metaphors to relate familiar concepts to new knowledge (Bowers & Flinders, 1990).
School Environment	Schools and classrooms must be organized to assure the development of individual potential, i.e., high expectations, challenging curriculum, valued activities/roles, and caring and supportive environments that develop positive self esteem. Collaboration with community agencies and home environments must be assured to promote student growth and learning (Wehlage et al., 1989).
Management	In order to fully develop student abilities and potential, leadership must use management strategies such as collaboration, shared decisionmaking, and decentralization to help staff to focus on the backgrounds, experiences, and abilities of urban learners (Lytle, 1992).

The restructuring of urban schools presents an opportunity to apply the creative energy and abilities of researchers, legislators, and educators in designing change. If knowledge about urban learners is the focus of such change efforts, the outcome will be urban students who are able to contribute to and strengthen society and enjoy the capacity to be life-long learners. Urban students must not be viewed as the problem, but rather as a major ingredient in the solution to problems of educational achievement, a strong economy, and a productive democratic society.

The Urban Education Project of RBS is further refining the themes that comprise the new vision for urban learners and developing educational strategies that will assist educators to fully implement the new vision in

schools/districts. The project staff looks forward to joining with other educators in the Mid-Atlantic region to develop the leadership, educational strategies, materials, and training that will turn the vision into reality.

AN ILLUSTRATION—
RESTRUCTURING TO EDUCATE THE URBAN LEARNER:
A DECISIONMAKING FRAMEWORK



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